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C O N F I D E N T I A L ABU DHABI 003344

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/16/2016

TAGS: AE KDEM PGOV PREL

SUBJECT: UAE PRESIDENT FORMALIZES INDIRECT ELECTIONS FOR
FEDERAL NATIONAL COUNCIL

REF: ABU DHABI 2655 AND PREVIOUS

Classified by Charge Martin Quinn, reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and comment: President Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan on August 15 formalized the UAE's move towards indirect elections to half the seats on the Federal National Council (FNC), the first national-level elections of any sort in the UAE since the federation's 1971 establishment. Minister for FNC Affairs Dr. Anwar Gargash said he expected these elections to take place before the end of the year. The decrees set in motion a process Khalifa announced last December. FNC elections represent a step in the right direction, but will not have an immediate impact on UAE governance. End summary and comment.

¶2. (U) President Khalifa's August 15 decree on the FNC selection process established a National Electoral Committee to conduct and supervise the election of one half of the 40 seats in the Councils. Minister of State for FNC Affairs Dr. Anwar Gargash will chair the committee; other members will include representatives from the Ministries of the Interior, Presidential Affairs, Justice, Health, Culture, and Youth and Community Development. Prior to the elections the Committee's role will reportedly be to establish procedures, dates, and locations for voting in each of the seven emirates, and conduct awareness campaigns for both the general public and the candidates themselves. Afterwards, the committee will announce election results and arbitrate subsequent disputes (a sometimes lengthy process, as seen in other precedents in the region). Gargash announced immediately after the decree that he expected the elections to take place before the end of 2006.

¶3. (U) Khalifa issued a separate decree August 11 formalizing the means of election. Each of the seven Amirs (rulers of individual emirates) will appoint an electoral college, which must have at least 100 times as many members as the emirate

has total representatives on the FNC. This electoral college next votes on half of the representatives in the FNC; the decree suggests that only these appointed electors are eligible to compete in the elections to fill these seats. Finally, each Amir directly appoints the other half of the members representing each emirate. As an example, Abu Dhabi and Dubai each have eight FNC members (more than the other emirates). Their Amirs must appoint at least 800 electors, who will elect four members of the new FNC. The Amirs will then appoint the other four.

¶4. (C) All seven emirates reportedly have submitted lists of potential electors, although the names have not been made public. Habib Mullah -- currently an appointed FNC member representing Dubai -- told PolOff August 16 that the prominent tribes and business families in each emirate would be heavily represented, and that therefore "no surprises" in the FNC's composition would be likely. Mullah guessed that most current members of the FNC, himself included, probably would be listed as electors, if only because the group was large enough for nearly every reasonably prominent citizen of a given emirate to participate. The public announcement of the electors, however, may illuminate the somewhat opaque centers and balance of power in the various emirates.

¶5. (C) Mullah said he definitely would not/not run in the elections, because to run and lose would demonstrate his weakness and negate his chance of an appointed seat. He added that he had a 50% chance of an appointment (since he occupied one of Dubai's previous eight appointed seats -- which will now be limited to four), implying that he was unsure of his chances of winning an election. Mullah speculated that many other members would have similar attitudes, which could make for a large number of new faces when the new FNC is finally seated.

¶6. (C) Comment: The indirect election of half the FNC is a cautious first step toward introducing democratic principles, even by regional standards. Nonetheless, Khalifa's two decrees -- along with Gargash's public assertions that elections would take place as previously anticipated before year's end (Al Bayan headline claims four months) -- indicate that the UAE is serious about the initiative. We expect steady progress towards establishing the electoral colleges now that the National Electoral Committee has been named, a move which Gargash told the Ambassador would be a "trigger...everything else will follow quickly (reftel)." It may be premature to assess public reactions to the decrees, but Mullah commented that both government officials and the public were wary of elections in general because of their perceived negative consequences in Kuwait and Bahrain. Post will continue to monitor FNC-related developments. End comment.

QUINN